

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

Adult Education Research Conference

2005 Conference Proceedings (Athens, GA)

Transformative Learning: Expanding Stories of Ourselves in Relationship with Stories of “Others” in Dialogue

Ilene C. Wasserman

The Fielding Graduate University, USA

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>

 Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Wasserman, Ilene C. (2005). "Transformative Learning: Expanding Stories of Ourselves in Relationship with Stories of “Others” in Dialogue," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2005/papers/8>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Transformative Learning: Expanding Stories of Ourselves in Relationship with Stories of “Others” in Dialogue

Ilene C. Wasserman

The Fielding Graduate University, USA

Abstract: *Transformative learning has developed over the last 25 years into a leading theory of adult learning. This paper describes what we learned from an appreciative cooperative inquiry of people’s experience in groups exploring faith, race and gender diversity. The inquiry itself created transformative dialogic moments. Transformational learning is framed from a relational perspective.*

Introduction

The capacity to engage the story of another whose social group identity (including race, faith, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality) is different and perhaps less dominant than one’s own, commands a level of coordinating meaning that is quite complex. Coordinating complex layers of meaning requires one to suspend judgment and to suspend a commitment to one’s essential truth to consider different, and potentially contradicting narratives. Such a process is challenging enough between two individuals. The process becomes even more challenging at increasing levels of complexity of relationship, where social identity group stories based on deeply embedded histories are still present. Working with adult learners calls on us to foster environments that invite people to learn in relationships, to co-create meaning with others, with particular regard to opportunities that engaging tensions that diverse narratives create.

This study identifies discursive processes that promote *transformative dialogic moments* in the engagement of social identity group differences by identifying what is occurring, in the forms of relating, when such profound engagements happen. A facilitated group reflection focused on what conditions enable people to stay engaged in a disorienting encounter or a moment of dissonance with *the other* such that the engagement became transformative. There are many factors that contribute to sustained engagement and transformative moments in relating across differences. The focus of this study was on communication processes, the turns and movements in relating.

A focus on communication processes, particularly from a social construction perspective, shifts the spotlight from the *individual cognitive* perspective to the *in-between or relational* arena. By focusing on the relationship as the locus of transformative learning, we learn how, through dialogic conversation and attending to mutuality, participants expand their deeply embedded social identity group stories, embracing those of the others whose stories were significantly different from their own.

Theoretical Framework

Social construction, communication theory and the emerging literature on relational theory provide the theoretical grounding for the exploration of transformative dialogic moments in the engagement of social identity group differences. Martin Buber’s definition (1958), and more recent writings from Kenneth Cissna and Robert Anderson (1998; 2002), define dialogic moments as instances when meaning “emerges in the context of relationship and when one acknowledges and engages another with a willingness to alter their own story” (2002, p.186). McNamee and Gergen (1999)

describe the transformative process as “first transforming the interlocutors’ understanding of the action in question ... and second, altering the relations among the interlocutors themselves” (1999, p 35). Thus the design of the research and the focus of analysis is on what was being formulated in the relationships rather than for each person.

The Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) (Cronen, Pearce, & Lannamann, 1982; Pearce, 2001, 2004) provides a theoretical framework and practical tools for analyzing how people make meaning and how people in relationships coordinate meaning. CMM provides set of concepts and models that facilitate analyzing what happens in the to’s and fro’s of communicating and aligning communicating in real-life situations. The key concepts suggest that whatever we do, what meaning we make, is not made alone, but in relation to or *coordination* with others. We choose what stories we tell or don’t, what stories we hear or don’t, in order to make our lives meaningful and bring *coherence* to ourselves and to our relationships. The complexity of the world within which we live suggests a sense of *mystery* and that there is always more to know. In instances where there is coordination, there is coherence. Where there is a lack of coordination, there is mystery. Our capability to coordinate our stories of each other and ourselves is enhanced by skills and tools that move us from mystery, to inquiry and curiosity, and to coherence.

CMM describes four key models that serve as tools to help people surface alternative ways of viewing their perspective in relationship with others’. The *hierarchy model of actor’s meaning* identifies the way meaning is shaped by the order of priority one attaches to different contexts (e.g., individual, group, cultural, relationship) in a particular episode. For example, one might amplify one’s own story nested within a relationship in the cultural context while another might view the episode as a story of culture nested with in the story of self. The difference in the way one nests the hierarchy of meaning has implications for how meaning is coordinated between and among people. The *serpentine model* depicts how any communication or speech act has a before, an after and a sequence. Meaning is made by how one punctuates when episode begins and ends and the sequence of turns within. The *daisy model* depicts the multiple conversations that provide context or reference to the episode. The *LUUUTT model* is an acronym highlighting the role of stories lived, **untold**, **unheard**, **unknown**, **told** and the manner of the storytelling itself (Pearce, 2004) all of which shape meaning.

Transformative dialogic moments as a concept merged the phenomenon of dialogic moments with transformative learning. The current conceptualization of transformative learning refers to the process “by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action” (Jack Mezirow, 2000; Jack Mezirow & Associates, 2000 p.7). Transformative learning is a process that involves critical self reflection to challenge assumptions, engage complex situations, question conformity, embrace change, and align actions toward the betterment of society (Brookfield, 1987; Dirkx, 1997; Kasl & Yorks, 2002; Marsick, 1990; Jack Mezirow, 2000; Jack Mezirow & Associates, 2000, 1990). Taking a communication approach to transformative learning builds on the notion of shifting *habits of mind* to shifting *habits of talking and engaging*.

Research Design and Analysis

The research design formulated for this study, an *appreciative cooperative inquiry*, integrated aspects of action inquiry research methodologies such as participatory action research (Park, 1999, 2000), cooperative inquiry (Baldwin, 2001; Kasl & Yorks, 2002; Reason & Bradbury, 2002), action inquiry (Torbert, 1991), and appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, Barrett, & Srivastva, 1995; Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 1999). We inquired into what was affirming, with particular regard to discursive processes that:

- Fostered dialogic moments in the engagement of social group identities with a history of conflict,
- Enabled people to stay engaged in the story of the other while being aware of their own story, and
- Sparked people's curiosity to understand the other and, consequently, oneself in relationship to one's group, in a new way.

The participants in this study were members of two groups who were formed and engaged independent of this research. Both were organized voluntarily for the purpose of exploring collective identity group differences. One group was exploring faith issues and included 18 women including Muslims, Christians (Catholics, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Quakers), Unitarians, Jews (Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Orthodox) and Bahá'is. The other group's members were human resource consultants exploring issues of race and gender. There were 8 members of this group including 2 African American women, 2 African American men, 2 White women and 2 White men. One of the White men was homosexual; the other group members were heterosexual.

While questions were formulated in advance, people's responses guided subsequent questions. In addition to the CMM model, circular questioning (Tomm, 1984a, 1984b) shaped the manner and direction of the interview probes. The data analyzed for the study derived from the facilitated guided reflection from both group meetings. The analysis included two levels: the group members' reflections in relationship with one another, and the researcher's analysis of how meaning emerged in the turns of these reflective conversations. Included in the analysis was how, in the process of reflecting, the groups enabled or inhibited certain conversations, expanded upon or lost what others said, and reconstructed the meaning of particular episodes.

Discoveries Made in the Process

The data collection process was both iterative and recursive. I learned things in the initial individual interviews that influenced the first group interviews, which influenced the follow-up individual interviews and so on. I saw patterns emerging that told a story about what the research process itself was doing. For example, I met with people individually before the first group interview to make a personal contact and invite them to begin their reflective process. I began with the questions: *Tell me about your beginnings with this group. What was it that attracted you to this group? What were your first impressions ... your hopes? Think about a time in the group ... a memorable or significant moment in the engagement of group level differences where you came to see yourself or your frame of mind differently in relationship to others.* Given my criteria for being part of the study, I was surprised, concerned and puzzled when the first responses I received were, "I am not sure there have been any." Then, a pattern emerged. Within seconds, there was a follow-up statement about moments that were potentially

transformative, yet were, for some reason, truncated before they could be explored. I noted these as potential episodes to be explored by the group as a whole. The very act of inviting people to recall a transformative dialogic moment helped them to construct one that they might not have framed as such prior to the invitation to reflect.

When the groups came together for the inquiry, I invited them to think about our individual interview and what emerged from them, or subsequent to them, that they would be interested in exploring as a group. I also gave a brief introduction to the CMM models to help guide the group reflection process. Despite my initial intention to focus the research on studying what contributed to the *fostering* of dialogic moments, I altered my approach when I encountered unanticipated responses from each of the groups. For one of the groups, potential episodes identified included both those where there had been a shared experience of a transformative dialogic moment, and those where there was something that was confusing, unexplained, even disorienting. The very process of exploring episodes where there had been dissonance, as a group, created a transformative dialogic moment in the group meeting. For the other group, the process of reflecting on episodes in the process of deciding which to explore helped identify what discursive processes fostered *and* inhibited transformative dialogic moments.

Findings and Conclusions: Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

This study contributed to the literature on transformative learning theory in the identification of discursive processes that foster transformative dialogic moments in the engagement of social identity group differences. The methodology itself demonstrated how learning in relational reflection, as distinguished from individual reflection, was significant in fostering a transformative learning process. The study builds on the notion of shifts in *habits of mind* to shifts in habits of relating. One of the enabling conditions that fostered transformative group reflection was using storytelling to exploring historical narratives that influence meaning making. Stories that had been a source of dissonance or a *disorienting dilemma* provided a focal point for members to present different perspectives and construe meanings from a shared *third party* perspective and to continue a thread of the story that now had *shared* meaning. Taking time for the group to reflect together deepened their individual and collective narratives, enlarging their stories of self in relationship with the other. Curiosity and engaging from a place of inquiry were essential processes for transformative learning in relationships.

The implications for this study are relevant to adult education, creating learning cultures and leveraging the richness that diversity and multiplicity of identity, when fully tapped in relating, offers. Perhaps a core finding was the reminder that taking the opportunity to pause and reflect for mutual sense making and expanding one's frames of references are critical for working and living in today's complex global environment.

References

- Baldwin, M. (2001). Working together, learning together: Co-operative inquiry in the development of complex practice by teams of social workers. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of Action Research*. London, England: Sage Publications.
- Brookfield, S. (1987). *Developing critical thinkers: Challenging adults to explore alternative ways of thinking and acting*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Cooperrider, D. L., Barrett, F., & Srivastva, S. (1995). Social construction and appreciative inquiry: A journey in organizational theory. In D.-M. Hosking, P. Dachler & K. J. Gergen (Eds.), *Management and organization: Relational alternatives to individualism*: Avebury Press.
- Cronen, V. E., Pearce, W. B., & Lannamann, J. (Eds.). (1982). *The Coordinated Management of Meaning: A theory of communication*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Dirkx, J. M. (1997). Nurturing soul in adult learning. In P. Cranton (Ed.), *Transformative learning in action: insights from practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kasl, E., & Yorks, L. (2002). *An epistemology for transformative learning theory and its application through collaborative inquiry*. Retrieved 1/28/02, 2002
- Ludema, J. D., Cooperrider, D. L., & Barrett, F. J. (1999). Appreciative Inquiry: The power of the unconditional positive question. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research*. London: Sage.
- Marsick, V. J. (1990). Action learning and reflection in the workplace. In J. Mezirow (Ed.), *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood: A guide for transformative and emancipatory learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (2000). Learning to think like an adult: Core concepts of transformation theory. In J. Mezirow (Ed.), *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. San Francisco, California: Josey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J., & Associates. (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. San Francisco. CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J., & Associates (Eds.). (1990). *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley and Sons.
- Park, P. (1999). People, knowledge, and change in participatory research. *Management Learning*, Vol 30(2), 141-157.
- Park, P. (2000). Knowledge and participatory research. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research* (pp. Pgs 1-20). London: Sage.
- Pearce, W. B. (2001). *A brief introduction to the coordinated management of meaning (CMM)*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Pearce, W. B. (2004). The coordinated management of meaning (CMM). In B. G. (Ed.) (Ed.), *Theorizing about communication and culture*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (2002). Inquiry and participation in search of a world worthy of human aspiration. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of Action Research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Tomm, K. (1984a). One perspective on the Milan approach, Part I: Overview of development of theory and practice. *Journal of Marriage and Family Therapy*, 10, 113-125.
- Tomm, K. (1984b). One perspective on the Milan approach, Part II: Description of session format and interviewing style and interventions. *Journal of Marriage and Family Therapy*, 10, 253-271.
- Torbert, W. (1991). *Individual and organisational transformation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.